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The Art of Communication

Skills and Professional Development



The other day I received a bill from a local hospital for a minor medical visit, which occurred a couple of months earlier. The bill surprised me because I normally receive a statement from my medical insurer well in advance of any provider's bill detailing the amount covered by insurance. Although it was not going to break the bank, it was enough to merit an inquiry because previous, similar visits had always been fully covered by insurance. I called the insurance company and a representative looked into the charge. She discovered that a claim had never been filed with the insurance company.

At this point, we both became confused. She offered to contact the hospital herself. I suggested that we make it a conference call and she agreed. To make a long story short, the hospital ended up waiving the charge completely — because I took the time to pick up the phone and ask.

The value of asking, of speaking to people — not by email or text — cannot be emphasized enough given our current culture of anti-communication. You may question my characterization of our culture as one of “anti-communication” given the fact that we do have multiple forms of media through which to communicate. However, are we truly communicating or just talking at each other? Are we all too eager to hit the SEND button instead of picking up the phone because having a conversation takes too much time? Who among us has not been offended because we misread the tone of an email; or even worse, inadvertently offended someone else because he or she misread the tone in a message we sent?

Like many of you, I regularly get emails from total strangers on a variety of subjects: requests for proposals (RFPs), nondisclosure agreements and government audit requests, just to name a few. Over the years, these emails and attached documents have included a mix of confusing, vague, heavy-handed and quite frankly contradictory language. Admittedly, such communications have often

been the source of great frustration for me. However, this frustration is greatly lessened when I pick up the phone and call the sender.

More often than not, during the call, more information comes to light that benefits both of us. On more than one occasion, the standard boilerplate language in the RFP, contract or even the email itself may state that the company does not negotiate when in fact it does. By making that call time and again, and having a real conversation, I have managed to negotiate deadline extensions, get problematic language waived, execute more succinct and reasonable agreements, and avoid a myriad of conflicts. And most importantly, I have corrected more than a few mistaken impressions (on both sides of the negotiating table).

Email does help to expedite processes but it does not always expedite communications. As George Bernard Shaw once said:

“The single biggest problem with communication is the illusion that it has taken place.”

It makes a difference to the entire communication when you make the effort to become verbally acquainted with the other party. When you find out that the person on the other side of that email discussion has three kids, 10 other contracts and was just given this project that morning, it reframes your thinking and, consequently, your approach. I would be willing to bet that you will advance any negotiation much faster and much farther with a simple 15-30 minute call than with a weeklong email chain. And who among us doesn't see the advantage of that?

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